


# FESTIVALS OF INDIA



PUBLICATIONS DIVISION

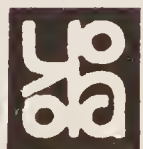




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# Introduction

All the great religions of the world have their followers in India. Over the centuries, communities belonging to different racial stocks have come together and mingled in the mainstream of Indian life to make this land a composite of different cultures. Each one of these groups has its own body of beliefs, myths and legends. These are celebrated in different forms of worship and in festivals. Festivals enliven social life and unite the people by bringing them together in joyful celebration of significant events and in shared remembrance of a common past. Festivals in India, like festivals in any part of the world, find expression for the people's zest for living, delight in nature and love of pageantry.

The Indian calendar is one long procession of festivals. These are as varied in origin as they are large in number. Some of them celebrate the birthdays of national heroes; some the eternal cycle of the seasons. Others have origin in religion, and in the myths and legends of popular faith. For their proper understanding and appreciation, therefore, it is essential to form a coherent idea of the religious beliefs of the Indian people. According to the census taken in 1991, out of a population\* of 846.30 million, 672.6 million are Hindus\*\*, 95.2 million Muslims, 18.9 million Christians, 16.3 million Sikhs, 6.3 million Buddhists, 3.4 million Jains and more than 3.5 million include Parsis, Jews, etc.

## Hinduism

Hinduism, as a religion is many-sided, yet bound by a common search for truth. It is a way of life, a fellowship of faiths. With the advent of the Aryans in northern India, it originated as a simple form of worship of the forces of nature and gradually spread to the rest of the country, evolving into a complex system of belief, action and social organisation and drawing into its fold local cults, gods and goddesses and diverse beliefs and modes of worship prevalent among the people.

Philosophical Hinduism believes in the oneness and all-pervasiveness of the Supreme Soul. The individual souls are but different manifestations of the Supreme Soul. Before the individual soul ultimately realises its identity with the Supreme, it must work out its destiny by passing through a series of births.

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\* Census of India 1991 Series I India, Paper 2 of 1992 Final Population totals.

\*\* Source : Census of India, Series I, India, Part II c(i), (ii) Census of India 1981, Series I, Paper 3 of 1984 (Religion), III Census of India, Series I of 1995 (Religion).



According to his station in life and stage of spiritual growth, a man must perform his duties.

Hindus have a vast body of literature, the four Vedas being the most sacred and the earliest. Associated with them are the Brahmanas and the Upanishads. Two books which have greatly influenced Hindu life and thought are the epics—the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. In the *Mahabharata* is contained the *Bhagavad Gita*, the quintessence of the Hindu view of life.

The mythological content of Hinduism is vast and rich and revolves around gods and goddesses who are believed to represent the various forces operating in the universe and, more particularly, in human nature. At the centre of it all is the great Hindu trinity represented by Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver and Shiva the Destroyer.

But Shiva of the Hindu pantheon is more than a mere destroyer. He is also the reproducer of life, the force that destroys in order to create. In this sense he is the god of all creative endeavour.

Shiva in popular symbolism, is generally represented as an ascetic sitting on a tiger skin. Snakes are coiled round his blue neck, his head and his body. He has a third eye in the centre of his august forehead, and a crescent moon rests on his head. His abode is the high mountain, Kailasa, in the Himalayas, and his mount is the sacred bull, Nandi. He is also worshipped in the form of a *linga*, representing the power behind creation. He is also Nataraja, lord of the dance, and is represented as such in sculptures and bronzes.

Shiva's consort has been given a variety of names according to her various forms, attributes and actions. Broadly, she represents two forms of the female energy or principle—one mild or protective, the other fierce or destructive. In her former aspect, she is called Uma, Gauri, Haimavati, Jagatmata, Bhavani, Amba and Parvati; and in the latter, she is known by such names as Durga, Kali and Chandi.

The most widely worshipped form is Durga, the goddess of battle. She is shown as having ten arms holding different weapons of retribution. She was sent by the gods to destroy Mahishasura (the buffalo demon). Her mount is the lion. Although warlike in aspect Durga is worshipped as the Mother who triumphs over evil.

Kali, perhaps a relic of the primitive pre-historic religion, looks more fierce than Durga. She wears a necklace of skulls, and her red tongue hangs hungrily out of her mouth. Animal sacrifices used to be made to this goddess whose dance of conquest is famous in legend.

Son of Shiva and Parvati is Ganesha. This god is very popular, being the household deity of prudence and prosperity. It is considered highly auspicious to invoke his blessings at the commencement of any undertaking.

According to a legend in the *Matsya Purana*, Parvati ordered Ganesha to keep guard at her door while she bathed. Shiva, coming home, was denied entry by him. The angry father cut off Ganesha's head, but on Parvati's request he ordered that the head of the first living being found should be brought to him.



This happened to be that of an elephant. Ever since, Ganesha has an elephant's head.

Vishnu, the Preserver of the Hindu Trinity, is the benevolent deity, who descends to earth whenever the creation is threatened by Evil. Two of his best known incarnations are Rama and Krishna.

Rama is the seventh incarnation of Vishnu. His exploits form the subject of the great epic, the *Ramayana*.

Born in Ayodhya (Uttar Pradesh), as heir to the throne, Rama was exiled from his kingdom for fourteen years. His devoted wife Sita and his brother Lakshmana accompanied him into exile. Ravana, the ten headed demon who was king of Lanka carried away Sita during her husband's absence. Rama set out in search of her and a great battle ensued between him and Ravana. Assisted by Hanuman, Rama was victorious and brought the faithful Sita back to his capital, where there was great rejoicing. His brother, Bharata, who had loyally ruled the kingdom as Rama's regent, welcomed them with open arms. For Hindus, Rama is the ideal man and king and Sita the ideal of womanhood.

The other popular incarnation of Vishnu, Krishna, was born to destroy Kansa, the evil king of Mathura. He grew to manhood among the cowherds of Mathura, and the love of the *gopies* (Milkmaids) for him symbolises the yearning of the soul for God. In the great war between Kauravas and the Pandavas described in the *Mahabharata*, Krishna sided with the Pandavas, his cousins. The *Bhagavad Gita*, based on a discourse given by him to prepare Arjuna, one of the Pandavas, for his duty in the great battle, contains the essence of the Hindu's view of life.

Krishna is represented as a handsome youth, sky-blue in colour, and holding a flute.

The consort of Vishnu is Lakshmi who, like the Greek Aphrodite, rose from the foam of the ocean. Enchantingly lovely, she stands on the lotus which is her symbol. She is the much-sought-after goddess of wealth and prosperity.

Brahma is the Creator in the Trinity. His consort is Saraswati who is worshipped as the goddess of learning and of the arts and sciences. She is represented as riding a swan and holding a lute in one hand.

## Islam

Islam means resignation to the will of God. It is strictly monotheistic religion which believes that there is only one God. Brotherhood and equality among the believers and a caste-free society are its main features. The holy Prophet Mohammed is believed to be the last and the greatest of the prophets, and the holy *Koran*, as revealed to the holy prophet, is the sacred book of the Muslims. The five duties of a devout Muslim are:

1. Belief in the one true God;
2. Pray five times a day;
3. Giving of alms;
4. A month of fasts every year; and
5. Pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in one's life-time.



India is one of the world's three biggest centres of Muslim life and culture. The Muslims in India belong to the same ethnic stock as the rest of the population. The flesh and blood is the same. There are, therefore, close cultural affinities between Muslims and non-muslims in India.

## Christianity

Although many of the present-day Christians embraced the religion in recent times, Christians came to this land in its earliest phase. Tradition has it that the Syrian Christians of South India were converted by Thomas Didymus, one of the twelve apostles of Christ. He is believed to have come to the Malabar coast about 50 A.D. and established seven churches in South India, where traditions of the ancient church are still preserved.

The Roman Catholicism in India owes a great deal to St. Francis Xavier, a Jesuit missionary who came to India in the middle of the sixteenth century.

It often surprises foreign visitors to discover that Christianity is as much a part of the Indian scene as the temples and tigers they read about. In parts of the country Christian churches are more typical features of the landscape than temples or mosques, and Christmas is as popular a festival among non-Christians as among Christians. Similarly, the great Hindu and Muslim festivals have become part of the Indian Christian way of life.

## Sikhism

The word 'Sikh' is derived from the original Sanskrit word *shishya*, meaning disciple. This eclectic monotheistic religion is an offshoot of Hinduism. Its founder Guru Nanak (1469-1539) was revered by both Hindus and Muslims alike. His teachings and those of the nine *gurus* who followed him are embodied in the *Adi Granth* or the *Granth Sahib*. Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708) welded the Sikhs into martial community in 1699 to fight religious persecution. He also instituted the use of the 'five Ks' which distinguish the Sikh community from others:

*Kangha*, a small comb in the hair;

*Kesh*, unshorn hair;

*Kripan*, a sword by the side;

*Kachha*, a pair of shorts; and

*Kara*, a steel bangle.

Their conventional mode of salutation consists in saying *Sat Sri Akal*—Truth is Eternal.

## Jainism

Jainism is of great antiquity, being older than even Buddhism. Its exponent, Vardhamana Mahavira, was born about 599 B.C. The Jains believe that right faith, right knowledge, right conduct and chastity lead the wayfarer along the path of salvation. Ultimate release from matter is, according to the Jains, the ideal state of existence for the soul.





*Janmashtami, the anniversary of Krishna, one of the most popular of Hindu gods, is celebrated at midnight.*



*Govardhan puja is performed during diwali celebration.*





Tribal dancers seen performing a dance.



As even the minutest being is believed to have life, the Jain is very careful not to destroy it.

Jainism is a monastic religion, and the Jain community consists not only of laymen but also of monks and nuns. The Jains are concentrated mostly in western India, particularly in Gujarat and Karnataka, where many beautiful temples have been built.

## **Zoroastrianism**

“There is but one path, the path of *Asha*. All other paths are false paths.” This quotation from the Book of *Yasna* sums up the teachings of Zoroaster. The path of *Asha* is the path of action—good thoughts, good words and good deeds—with emphasis on service. Every living being, whether plant or animal, is believed to possess an eternal principle (*fravashi*). *Fravashis* of the noble deed are invoked at every important Parsi festival, and it is a high honour for a Parsi to have his name included in the list of *fravashis*.

Because of religious persecution, the Parsis left their homeland in Iran and sought refuge in India in the seventh century A.D. They live mostly in western India, particularly in Mumbai.

## **Buddhism**

In the sixth century B.C., that is about the same time as Mahavira, Prince Siddhartha, who later came to be known as the Buddha, revolted against the religion as practised in his day. Like Mahavira, he renounced the world and discovered that *kama* (desire) lay at the root of all evil. The cessation of desire he found possible only through knowledge. In the ideal state of existence there is a release from the cycle of births and rebirths and this is called *nirvana*. In this state, the ego of man is completely annihilated, and he is free from joys and sorrows alike.

From India, the country of its origin, Buddhism spread to other parts of the world. It found a large following in the countries of eastern and south-eastern Asia.



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## All-India Festivals

The great diversity of Indian religious beliefs and the varied cultural traditions of the different states never fail to interest the visitor. This diversity accounts for the large number of festivals in India. Some of these are common to the whole country, while others are observed only by a sect or community.

The major festivals common to all India are discussed in the following pages in order of their occurrence. No dates have been given for some festivals as these follow the lunar calendar and can occur in any month of the solar calendar. All Muslim festivals fall in this category.

January 1—*New Year's Day* : This international festival is celebrated mainly by the upper and middle class city-dwellers.

January 26—*Republic Day* : On this day in 1930, the people of India took a pledge to work unceasingly for the establishment of a Sovereign Democratic Republic of India. This goal was reached on January 26, 1950, when the new Constitution came into force.

Celebrations are held every year throughout the country. Those in the capital (New Delhi) however, are the most spectacular. They include a massive parade, folk dances, and a pageant from the states that shows the cultural unity of the country.

*Maha Kumbha Mela* : This great religious gathering is held four times in twelve years. A legend has it that before the universe took shape, the *devas* (gods) and the *asuras* (demons) churned the formless waters. From the ocean, there arose Dhanvantari carrying in his hands a *kumbha* (pot) containing nectar. The *devas* and the *asuras* struggled for the possession of the precious liquid. During this struggle, drops of nectar fell at twelve places in the world. Four of these, namely, Hardwar, Ujjain, Prayag and Nasik are in India, and this great *mela* is held at each of these places in a twelve year cycle.

February/March—*Vasanta Panchami* : It is mainly a North Indian spring festival. The yellow of the flowering mustard fields is the colour of the day. Field sports and kite-flying competitions are part of the celebrations. In Bengal, Sarasvati, the goddess of learning and the arts, is worshipped.

February/March—*Shivaratri*: This is dedicated to the worship of Shiva. Anyone worshipping him on this occasion is believed to be released from the cycle of birth and rebirth.

This festival has special significance in Kashmir and lasts 15 days. The thirteenth day, known as *Herath*, is observed as a day of fast followed by a family feast.

February/March—*Holi* : There are many legends concerning the origin of this brightly coloured, cheerful spring festival. The most popular among these concerns Prince Prahlad, the fearing son of the evil King Hiranyakasipu. Prahlad did not give up worshipping the god Vishnu in spite of fearful persecution by his father and his demon aunt Holika. Ultimately, when Holika, who was immune to death by fire, took Prahlad and entered a blazing furnace built for his destruction, it was the wicked Holika who was burnt to ashes by the divine intervention, while Prahlad came out unscathed.

Holi is a festival of colour. Riotously cheerful crowds fill the streets, squirting coloured water on all passers-by. All people, regardless of age, caste or creed, participate in this fun.

On the evening preceding the colour festival, bonfires are lit. These symbolise the burning of Holika and the destruction of evil. Holi is also associated with the divine love of Radha and Krishna, and is celebrated with particular eclat in the villages around Mathura, the birth-place of Krishna.

March 21—*Jamshed Navroz* : This is celebrated by the Fasli section of the Paris community. It dates from the time King Jamshed ruled Persia. Worship at the fire temples is followed by visits to friends and relatives when greetings are exchanged.

March/April—*Mahavira Jayanti* : Vardhamana Mahavira, the twenty-fourth Tirthankara, was born on this day more than 2,500 years ago. For the Jains, it is a day dedicated to his memory. The day attracts pilgrims from all parts of the country to the ancient Jain shrines at Girnar and Palitana in Gujarat.

March/April—*Good Friday* : The Christians observe Good Friday as the day on which Jesus Christ laid down his life for the good of humanity. Services and recitals of religious music are held in the churches.

March/April—*Easter* : The Christian belief in the resurrection of Christ is celebrated with fervour by members of the community. Processions are taken out in some parts of the country.

April/May—*Vaisakhi* : Vaisakhi or Baisakhi is the first day of the month of Vaisakha—the beginning of the Hindu year in some parts of the country. A holy bath in a river, tank or well is an important feature of the day's observance. For the Sikhs in Punjab and other parts of the country, this day has a particular significance, as it was on this day in 1699 that Guru Gobind Singh founded the *Khalsa*.

April/May—*Buddha Jayanti* : Siddhartha, who later came to be known as the Buddha, was born on the full moon day of Vaisakha in 563 B.C. at Lumbini in Nepal. This day is observed by people of all faiths.

*Shab-e-Barat\** : Muslims believe that on this night, God registers the actions of men and dispenses their fate according to their deeds.

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\* Like all other Muslim festivals, this can occur in any month of the solar calendar.



Originally intended by the holy Prophet Mohammed as an occasion for prayerful vigils and fasting, this has developed into a joyous festival celebrated with fire-works, illuminations and crackers.

*Id-ul-Fitr\** : Coming with the new moon, this festival marks the end of Ramzan, the ninth month of the Muslim year. It was during this month that the holy Koran was revealed. Muslims keep a fast every day during this month and on the completion of the period, which is decided by the appearance of the new moon, Id-ul-Fitr is celebrated with great eclat. Prayers are offered in mosques and Idgahs and festivals are held. All Muslims, young and old, dress in their finest and best clothes. The Hindus join the Muslims in celebrations of this great festival.

The daily fasts are kept with particular enthusiasm in cities like Lucknow which are important centres of Muslim culture in the country. Every evening, drums are beaten to announce that the sun has set and the day's fast is ended. Mosques are crowded with worshippers and resound with the recitation of the holy Koran. The fasting is observed very strictly by a vast majority of the Muslims in India. And, early on the following morning, the faithful wake up to take light refreshments before the time begins for the next day's fast.

*Id-ul-Azha\** : The Id-ul-Azha is another festival of the Indian Muslims, which is celebrated with great rejoicing. It commemorates the ordeal of Hazrat Ibrahim, who had been put to a terrible test by God when he was asked to sacrifice whatever was dearest to him and he decided to sacrifice the life of his son. As he was on the point of applying the sword to his son's throat, it was revealed to him that this was meant only to test his faith, it was enough if instead he sacrifices only a ram in the name of Allah. This is celebrated on the 10th day of Zilhijja, when the Haj celebrations at Mecca are rounded off by the sacrifice of goats or camels. In India, too, goats and sheep are sacrificed all over the country and prayers are offered.

July/August—*Naga Panchami* : Naga means snake and *panchami* is the fifth day of the lunar fortnight. This festival is associated with the great serpent Adishesha or Ananta (Infinite) on whom the god Vishnu is believed to recline during the intervals between the dissolution of one universe and the creation of another.

Huge cloth effigies of the serpent are made and worshipped. Stone images of snakes are bathed in milk and cobras are offered milk in the belief that this will result in immunity from snake-bites.

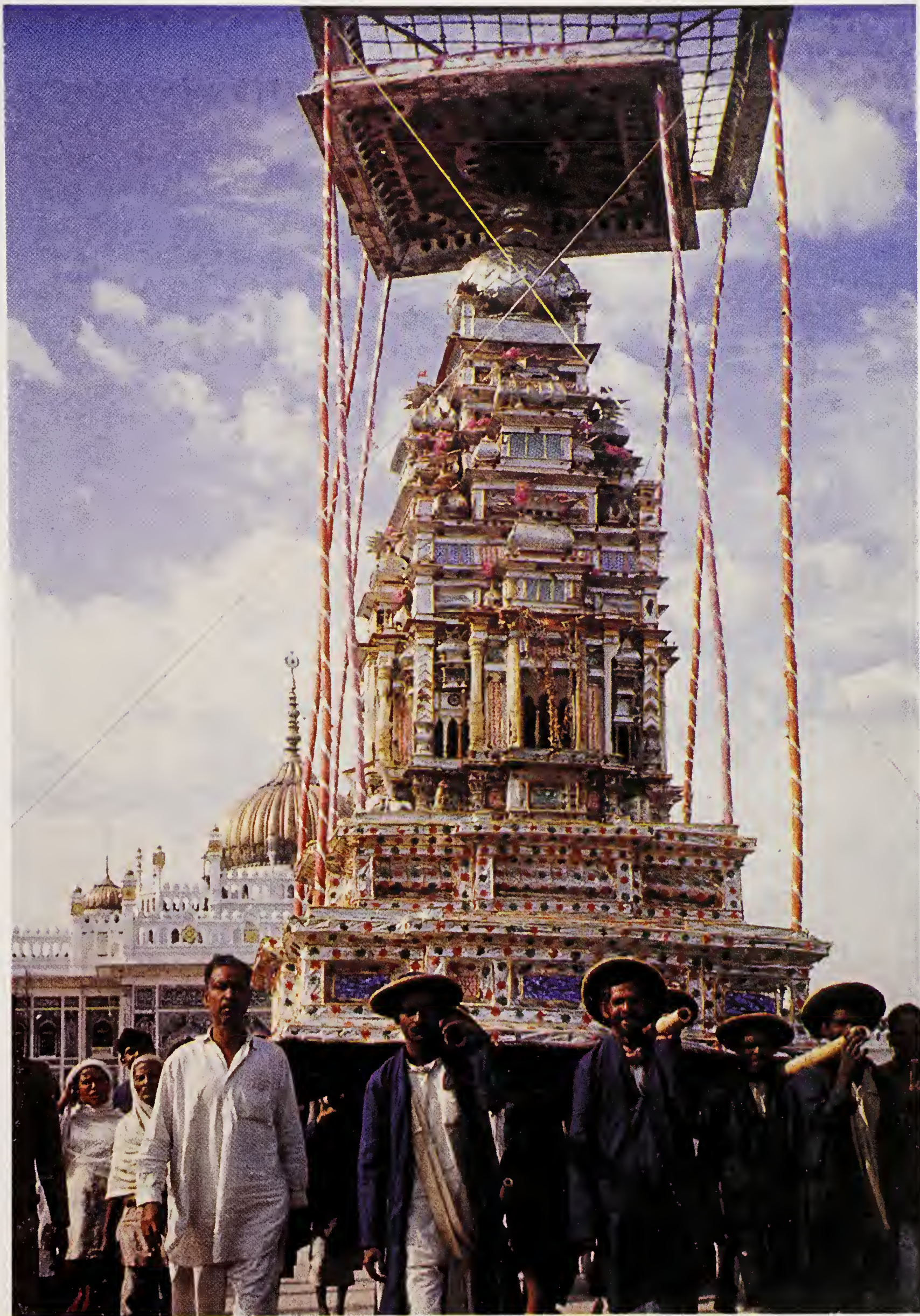
August 15—*Independence Day* : India achieved independence on August 15, 1947. It is a day of dedication for all the people in India. The National Flag is unfurled and public tributes are paid to national heroes. The Prime Minister hoists the flag on the historic Red Fort in Delhi.

July/August—*Raksha Bandhan* : In the days when gods fought with the demons, the consort of Indra (the Puranic King of the Heavens) tied a *rakhi*

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\* Like all other Muslim festivals, this can occur in any month of the solar calendar.





The *taziyas* and *alams* proceeding to Karbala on the occasion of *Muharram*.





*Raksha Bandhan*—a sister ties sacred thread around the wrist of her brother.



People in Punjab greet arrival of harvest time, *Baisakhi* with a vigorous bhangra dance.





The annual festival of Christ's birth being celebrated on 25th December. Santa Claus said to bring children presents on the night before *Christmas*.





*Chhams*, a highly choreographed sacred dance-drama is the core event of every monastic festival in Ladakh. Resident lamas perform it in the courtyard of the monastery.



In the Kulu valley in the Himalayas, the hill people celebrate *Dussehra* with a colourful mass ceremony.



(a silken amulet) around his wrist, by virtue of which, it is said, the god won back his celestial abode from his enemies.

On this day, sisters tie *rakhi* on the wrists of their brothers to protect them against evil influences. Many consider it a rare privilege to be chosen to act the part of brothers to the girls who may tie *rakhis* on their wrists.

This is also the day set apart for Brahmins to change their sacred thread. In Mumbai, it is an occasion for offering coconuts to the sea.

August/September—*Khordad Sal* : This day is the birth anniversary of the Prophet Spitaman Zarathustra (Zoroaster), who was born at the beginning of the first millennium B.C. This is one of the most important Parsi festival.

August/September—*Ganesha Chaturthi* : Ganesha, the elephant headed god of wisdom and prosperity, is a popular deity and is a favourite with children. Ganesha presides over the lintel of the doorway in many a Hindu home as he is believed to ward off all evil.

The festival is celebrated with special enthusiasm in Maharashtra, where it lasts more than ten days. On the first day, a clay image of Ganesha is brought into the house amidst music and dancing. For ten days it is worshipped with a great deal of festivity. On the last day, the image is taken out in a procession and immersed in a lake, river or the sea. Cultural programmes are organised in the cities, and fairs are held in many places.

August/September—*Janmaashtami* : Krishna is one of the most popular of Hindu gods. The anniversary of his birth is celebrated at midnight because he was born at that hour. The devout observe fast until midnight. In temples and homes events of Krishna's life are enacted. The celebrations are most remarkable in and around Mathura where Krishna was born. In Maharashtra, groups of young boys go in processions breaking up pots of curd (yogurt) hung up in the streets, as the child Krishna is believed to have done.

A similar ceremony is observed in South India. A pole smeared with oil is set up, and an earthen pot containing money and silk is tied to its top. Boys dressed as Krishna try to climb the pole and win the prize while spectators squirt water at them.

*Muharram\** : It is observed in different ways in various parts of India, though the basic theme is the same in all these observations; that is, the first ten days of Muharram, the first month of the Muslim year, are dedicated to the mourning and remembrance of the martyrdom of Hazrat Imam Hussain, grandson of the prophet Mohammed, and the son of Hazrat Ali and Fatima. Hazrat Imam Hussain died on the 10th day of Muharram, 61 A.H., while fighting the forces of Yazid, when Hazrat Ali's whole family was practically slaughtered.

This tragedy is observed with great passion in Lucknow, in particular, as it is the centre of Shia culture and religious activities, and accordingly a large

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\* Muharram, as an observance of mourning cannot be described as a festival. It is included among festivals of India because of its observance with piety and pageantry by a large number of people all over the country.



number of *taziyas* and the *alamas* (standards of Hazrat Imam Hussain's army) are taken out all over the city. The *taziyas* contain wooden and paper models of the mausoleum of Hazrat Imam Hussain, and the processions carrying these terminate in open spaces called *Imambaras*, where they are buried.

In places other than Lucknow, the *taziyas* are taken out and buried in the local burial ground known as the *Karbala*. Scenes depicting the battle of *Karbala* are enacted by wrestlers and gymnasts as the *alamas* are taken out in procession on the first nine days of *Muharram*.

October 2—*Gandhi Jayanti* : The birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi is celebrated with reverence, and homage is paid to the great leader. Mass prayers and spinning are held. In Delhi, large number of people gather at Gandhiji's *samadhi* at Rajghat to offer floral tributes and recite verses from the Gita, the Koran and the Bible and to chant the Mahatma's favourite hymns.

September/October—*Dussehra* : Symbolising the triumph of good over evil, *Dussehra* is one of the chief festivals of India, and is celebrated, in various ways, throughout the country. It is a ten-day festival. Each of the first nine nights (*navaratri*) of this festival is dedicated to a different aspect of the goddess *Durga*. The origin of *Durga Puja* (*Durga* worship) goes back to epic times when Rama invoked the help of *Durga*, the war goddess, against the demon king *Ravana*.

In North India, vivid portrayals of the battle between Rama and *Ravana* are given by masked dancers who go on elaborate floats in a procession through the cities.

The tenth day is the culminating point of the festival. Colossal paste-board effigies of the three principal demons of the *Ramayana*—the ten-headed *Ravana*, *Meghnada* and *Kumbhakarna*—are erected. These are packed with crackers and explosives. The festivities conclude with Rama shooting fiery arrows into the effigies, which explode the crackers inside them.

In Bengal, beautiful idols of *Durga* are worshipped for nine days and on the ninth day, taken out in a procession for immersion in a river or a pond.

In the Kulu valley in the Himalayas, the hill people celebrate *Dussehra* with a colourful mass ceremony in which village-gods are taken out in procession and an animal is offered in ritual sacrifice to the gods.

Also famous is the *Dussehra* of Mysore, where caparisoned elephants lead a colourful procession through the gaily decorated streets of Mysore city.

October-November—*Diwali* : Every home, however lowly, is decorated with twinkling *divas* (clay lamps with oil) to welcome *Lakshmi*, the goddess of wealth and prosperity. Unlit houses are, it is believed, overlooked by the goddess. Rice-flour designs on the door-steps, and fire-works and illuminations lend colour and picturesqueness to this festival.

The new commercial year begins with *Diwali* and businessmen open new account books on this day. *Diwali* heralds the approach of winter, and the winter crops are sown.





*Raas Leela* celebrations in Manipur.



Local people of Ladakh in their resplendent best perform folk dance during dosmoche in the courtyard of the Leh palace.





In Bengal, beautiful idols of Durga are worshipped for nine days and then taken out in a procession for immersion in a river.





*Teej* is mainly women's festival in honour of goddess Parvati as well as to celebrate beginning of the monsoon rain in Rajasthan.

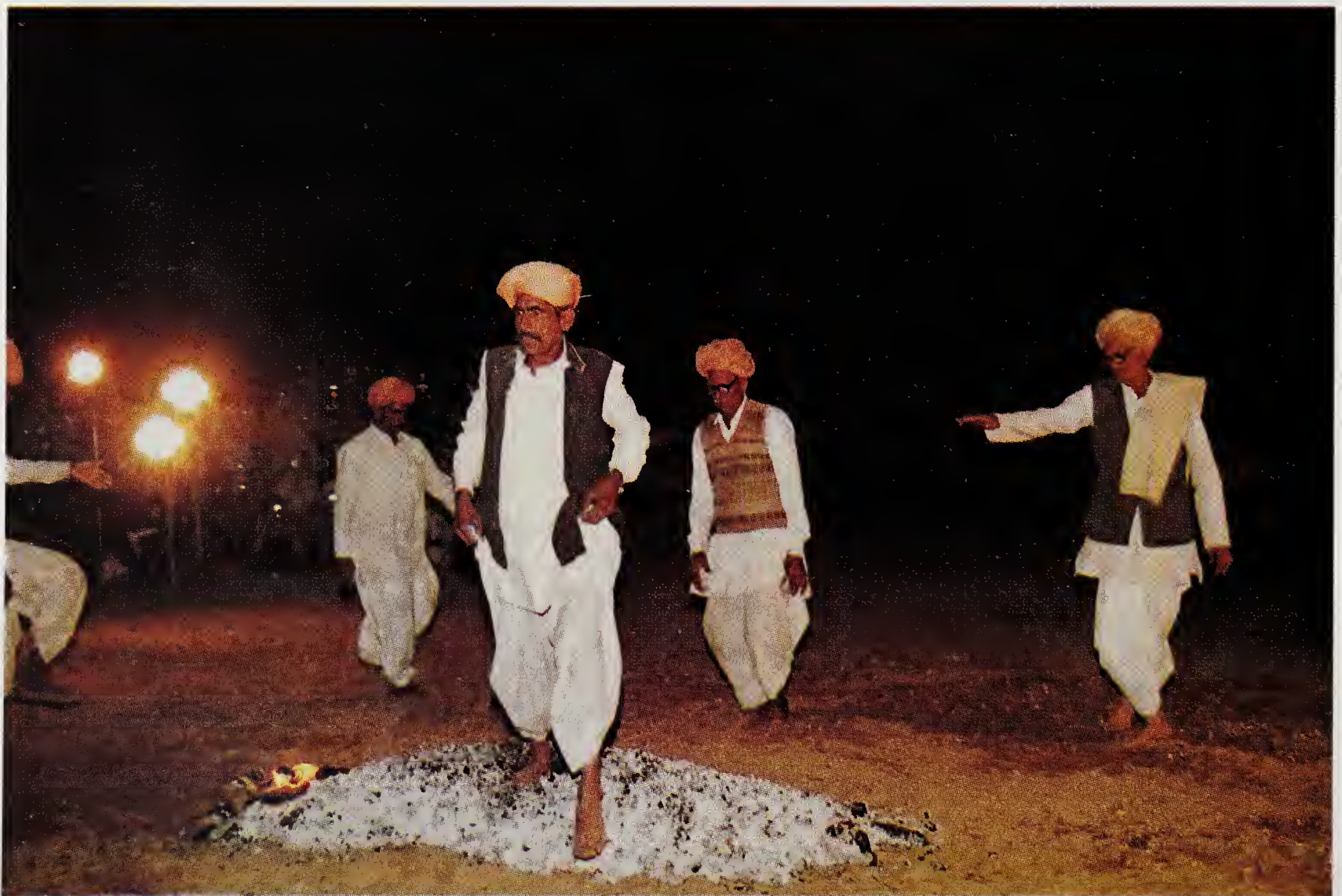


The women of Rajasthan gracefully balance pitcher on their heads on their way to the temple of goddess Parvati for the ceremonial bath of the deity during *Gangaur*.





*Dussehra* is celebrated as *Navratri* in Gujarat. Every evening during nine nights, women folk perform *garba* dance.



*Fire festival* is celebrated in Rajasthan. People walk on burning coal as well as throw fire from their mouth.



According to a popular belief, this loveliest of Indian festivals celebrates Rama's victorious return to his capital from exile.

October/November—*Gurpurab* : Guru Nanak (1469-1539), the founder of Sikhism, endeavoured through his teachings to rid both Hinduism and Islam of the superficialities in religion. His teachings made him equally revered by both the communities.

The four places most sacred to the Sikhs are: Amritsar, Taran Taran, Patna and Anandpur. This Sikh festival is celebrated there with great enthusiasm.

For two days and nights preceding the festival, the *Granth Sahib* (the holy book of the Sikhs) is read continuously from beginning to end.

On the day of the festival, the *Granth Sahib* is taken out in an impressive procession through the streets.

*Id-i-Milad* or *Bara Wafat\** : The twelfth day of the Muslim month Rabi-ul-Awwal is sacred to Muslims both as the birth and the death anniversary of the Prophet.

November 14—*Children's Day* : The birthday of free India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, is celebrated throughout the country as Children's Day. Groups of children participate in rallies and cultural programmes.

December 25—*Christmas* : The birth anniversary of Jesus Christ is celebrated by Christians and non-Christians alike. It is observed with special enthusiasm in the big cities like Delhi and Kolkata, where shops and homes take on a festive air. Families get together around decorated Christmas trees and gifts are exchanged.

On Christmas Eve, services are held at midnight in the churches. In some North Indian villages, groups of Christians sing indigenous carols to the accompaniment of musical instruments.

December/January—*Gurpurab* : The birth anniversary of Guru Govind Singh (1666-1708), tenth in the line of Sikh religious teachers, is celebrated with great enthusiasm by the Sikhs.

It was Guru Govind Singh who welded the Sikhs into a martial community. In 1699, at Anandpur in the Punjab, he tested and chose five of the most courageous of the community to form the *Khalsa*, a militant fraternity of the 'Pure'. They are called the *Panj Pyare* (the five beloved).

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\* Like all other Muslim festivals, this can occur in any month of the solar calendar.



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# Regional Festivals

## Kashmir

March/April—*Nau Roz* : The Kashmiri New Year's Day is a day of general festivity and rejoicing throughout the State.

May—*Jaitha Ashtami* : The eight day of the bright fortnight of Jyaistha, the third month of the Hindu calendar, is the birthday of the goddess Ragniya, who is believed to have her abode in Khir Bhavani, about 22 km (14 miles) from Srinagar. For days before the festival, all roads and streams lead to Khir Bhavani, a well-known spring-girt temple, where people pray and make offerings of milk, *kheer* (rice boiled in milk) and flowers to the goddess.

June—*Mela Hemis Gompa* : There are large number of Buddhists in Ladakh and their festivals are associated with ancient monasteries. One of these is held at the famous Hemis Gompa, 40 km from Leh. It is the oldest, richest and biggest monastery in Ladakh. The fair is held on the 10th day of the fifth Buddhist month every year and lasts three days.

The Lamas dance wearing masks, and the low subdued notes of the music create an air of mystery. The *Mela* celebrates the birthday of Padma Sambhava, the founder of Lamaism.

August/September—*Urs Shah Hamadan* : Shah Hamadan was a Muslim saint of Persia, who visited Kashmir towards the end of the fourteenth century. His shrine in Srinagar is greatly revered by Muslims who hold *urs* every year to commemorate his visit to this happy valley.

December/January—*Khichri Amavasya* : According to Hindu mythology, Kashmir was the abode of Yakshas or semi-divine beings. The Lord of the Yakshas is invited on this day to relish the *khichri* (rice cooked with dal and ghee) which is placed on roof-tops in plates.

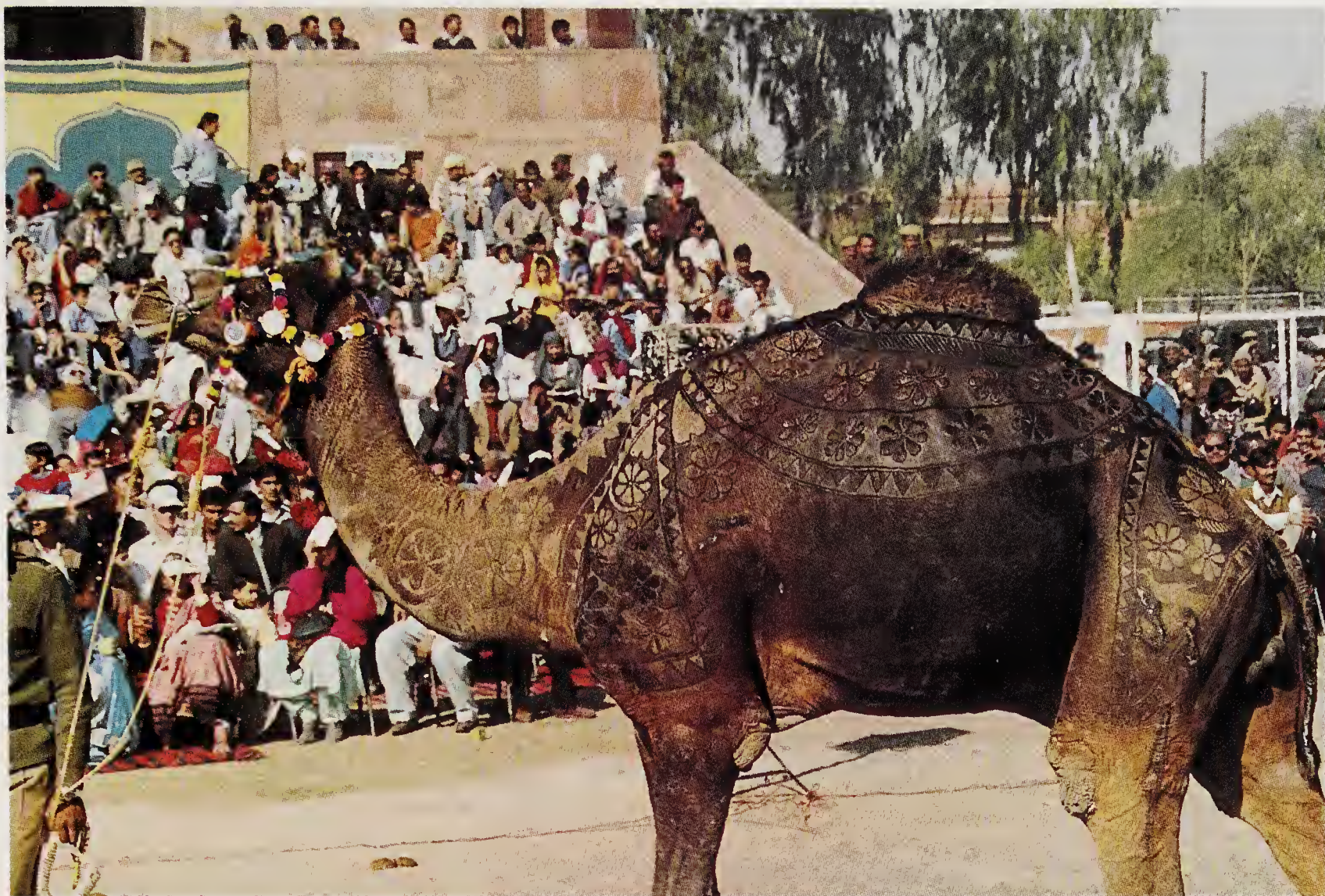
## Punjab and Haryana

January—*Lohri* : It marks the culmination of winter. Children go from door to door and collect funds for community bonfires which are lit in the evening. People gather round the bonfires, throw sweets, crisp rice and popcorn into the flames, sing popular folk songs and exchange greetings.

October/November—*Tikka* : This festival is celebrated on the day following Diwali.

Women make a paste of saffron and rice, and apply it on their brothers' foreheads, as a mark of protection from evil.





*Cattle Fair, Bijnaur.* It is a fashion show of camels where the coat is trimmed in artistic manner.



Tamil Nadu, New Year celebration is incomplete without decorating front of the house with dry bright colours.





*Ganesh Chaturthi* is celebrated with special enthusiasm in Maharashtra. The image of Lord Ganesha is taken out in a procession.





A colourful *Holi*.





Goa Carnival is celebrated with dance and music.



## Himachal Pradesh

*Minjar Mela* : Held in the picturesque setting of Chamba, this hill festival provides a great spectacle. People from the town and the neighbouring villages gather at the cliff overlooking the river Ravi. Here everyone throws a minjar (a silk and silver tassel) into the torrent. This is a symbolic sacrifice to propitiate the river goddess who is believed to avert all calamities from the town.

April and October—*Jwalamukhi Fair* : The goddess of the volcano Jwalamukhi, in the Kangra valley, is worshipped by throngs of hill people in their colourful costumes, who come from the surrounding areas. The jets of inflammable gas that issue from the volcano are worshipped as sacred fire from the mouth of the goddess herself.

## Delhi

March/April—*Christian Mela at Mehrauli* : At Mehrauli, 13 kms from Delhi, a procession of Christians from all over the metropolis goes through the streets of the little town, singing hymns. A service is held in the interesting little St. John's Church, built early in this century.

August/September—*Sair-e-Gulfaroshan* : The distinctive feature of this unique 'Festival of Flowers' is joint participation in the celebrations by Hindus and Muslims. Huge *pankhas* (fans) made of palm leaves and decorated with tinsel and flowers are carried through the picturesque town of Mehrauli. Fire dancers lead the procession. All the participants, Hindus as well as Muslims, together go to the Dargah Khwaja Sahib, a place sacred to the Muslims, and then to the Hindu Jog Maya temple.

In the evening, there is music and dancing.

December—*Urs Hazrat Nizam-ud-din* : The Saint, Hazrat Khwaja Nizam-ud-din Aulia (1238-1324), held the coveted position of Domestic Prelate through the rule of three dynasties. His tomb, which has become a shrine, is revered by people of all communities. Many of the devotees believe that the water of the sacred tank there possesses healing properties.

*Mushairas* (poetic symposia) and *qawwalis*, in which leading poets and musicians, take part, are held during the *urs*, and pilgrims come from all over the country.

## Uttar Pradesh

March/April—*Car Festival at Mathura* : In the Sri Rangji Temple at Brindavan, near Mathura, gorgeous *vahanas* (chariots) carry the temple deity Vishnu and his consort Lakshmi through the streets for ten days.

The Sri Rangji Temple was built in 1851 and is managed entirely by South Indian Brahmins.

March/April—*Rama Navami* : The birthday of Rama, the celebrated hero of the famous epic, the *Ramayana*, is enthusiastically celebrated at Ayodhya (Faizabad), his birth place. Temples are decorated, religious discourses are held



and the *Ramayana* is recited for ten days. People gather in their thousands on the banks of the sacred river Sarayu for a dip.

July/August—*Sravana Festival* : The Sri Rangji Temple at Brindavan near Mathura is dedicated to the god Vishnu. According to a legend, the god sent his elephant to collect flowers. The elephant wandered too close to the water and its leg was snapped up by a crocodile. Vishnu answered the elephant's prayer for help, and came riding on Garuda to save him.

Effigies of an elephant and a crocodile are floated in the temple tank. An ingenious device clamps the elephant's foot into the jaws of the crocodile. The god is then brought in on his mount, and a fire cracker flung by him at the crocodile separates the two figures in the tank.

August/September—*Ban Yatra* (the Forest Pilgrimage) : In this month, Krishna is believed to have protected the villagers from heavy rains by lifting up the mountain Govardhan, situated a few miles from Mathura. This forest pilgrimage, which commemorates the event, lasts a month. During this period, the pilgrims visit all the places connected with the life of Krishna. *Ras Lila*, a dance-drama depicting episodes from the life of Lord Krishna, is performed here by troupes who specialise in this art.

September/October—*Dussehra* : Rama-lila organised at Ramnagar town is fantastic. The acting area itself is about ten square kilometres. The places where main incidents take place are Ayodhya (Rama's birth-place) Janakpuri (Sita's paternal home), Panchavati (the site where Rama stayed during his exile), the river Sarayu, the battle-field, Ravana's court and his golden castle. The spectators move from locality to locality as the Ramalila scenes shift. The programme is spread over forty days.

October/November—*Kansa Ka Mela* : To commemorate the destruction of the demon King Kansa of Mathura by Krishna, a fair is held at Mathura and at Fatehpur Sikri (the sixteenth century capital of Akbar). Huge effigies of the demon are set up in the midst of the fair. Two boys representing Krishna and his brother Balram, are then carried in Chariots or on horseback, and they aim flower-decked arrows at the effigies. This is the signal for a general onslaught on the helpless demon who dies the death he deserves.

## **Bihar and Chhatisgarh**

November—*Chhath* : The Chhath festival is celebrated in veneration of the Sun God throughout Bihar with as much zeal, devotion and enthusiasm as Durga Puja in Bengal. This is a festival of austerity and the devotees after six days of fasting and penance go to the nearest river or tank and offer *arghya* (oblation) to the Sun God once at sunset and again at sunrise. After the oblations, they break their fast by taking *prasad*. Places where devotees undergo fast are kept clean and even non-devotees clean the path through which devotees pass through to offer *arghya* to the Sun God.

Among the festivals observed by the adivasis are:

March/April—*Sarhul* : This is a festival of flowers. During this month, the



sal flowers are brought to the *sarna*, the place of worship. The *pahon* (the head of the village) propitiates all gods of the Mundas. The celebrations go on for several days. This festival is celebrated in the tribal districts of Ranchi, Hazaribagh, Santhal Parghanas, Singhbhum etc.

August/September—*Karam festival* : It is celebrated for the prosperity of the village. The *Karam* sapling is brought from the jungle by a bachelor, and planted in the village. Then follows singing, dancing and taking of rice beer.

## Assam and Manipur

January—*Bhogali Bihu* : Bhogali Bihu is an Assamese harvest festival. After women have harvested the winter paddy, thatched pavilions are set up in every village, and young men spend the night fasting. According to the custom of the festival, the pavilions are set ablaze early next morning. This is the signal for the festivities to begin. Buffalo fights are a major attraction.

April/May—*Goru and Rongali Bihu* : The Goru Bihu or the cattle festival is celebrated on the Hindu New Year's Day. Cattle are washed and decorated. They are smeared with turmeric and are treated to *gur* (jaggery) and brinjals.

On the occasion of the Rongali Bihu, Assamese girls try to out rival one another in weaving beautiful scarves for presentation to the men of their choice. The boys look for the loveliest *kopow* (dove) orchids to present to the belles. These beautiful scarves and orchids add colour to the dances that follow.

October/November—*Ras lila* : Graceful dancers of Manipur, the birthplace of the famous Manipuri Dance, enact scenes from the life of Krishna. As a majority of the Assamese are Vaishnavas, and since Krishna was incarnation of Vishnu, this festival has great significance for them.

## Tripura

July—*Karchi Puja* : The seven-day festival is celebrated at Agartala, capital of Tripura in the temple of Chaturdash Devta. There are 14 idols of the deity, Shakti installed here. In this religious festival, every family in the state is expected to participate.

Seven days after the conclusion of this festival follows another, the festival of *Ker Puja*. This is held in a central locality of Agartala Town. As seven Chantai Narang priests belonging to a Tripuri Brahmin Community chant *mantras*, a huge pole suspended from above slowly comes down and touches the ground. *Ker Puja* is considered very sacred and important in Tripura State.

November—*Tripureshwari Temple Festival* : The festival is held during Diwali in the temple constructed by the royal family of Tripura over 450 years ago at Udaipur Town. People from within Tripura and outside attend the festival in large numbers. This place is associated with Daksha Yagna mentioned in mythology. According to legends, a part of the body of Parvati, consort of Lord Shiva fell at this spot and a temple was constructed here.



## Bengal

*Gangasagar Mela* : Pilgrims congregate to bathe on Sagar Island, about 64 km (40 miles) from Diamond Harbour at the confluences of river Ganga with the water of the Bay of Bengal. A fair is also held.

February/March—*Ramakrishna Utsav* : Ramakrishna, a great Hindu saint, was born on February 20, 1833 in the village of Kamarpukar. Swami Vivekananda was one of his disciples, who instituted the famous Ramakrishna Mission which is responsible for spreading the cult of Vedanta all over the world. Ramakrishna's birth anniversary is celebrated by his devotees with great solemnity.

March/April—*Dol Purnima* : This festival is much the same as Holi in other parts of north India. An image of Krishna, smeared with coloured powders, is placed in a *dol* or swaying cradle decorated with flowers and carried in a procession to the accompaniment of songs, specially composed for the occasion.

Being also the birthday of Gauranga or Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, a sixteenth century Vaishnavite poet and saint, it assumes special significance for the followers of Vishnu.

April 14—*Naba Barsha (Bengali New Year's Day)* : The day begins with *prabhat pheries* (early morning processions), songs and dance to welcome the New Year. A dip in a river or tank is another essential feature of the day's ritual.

With powdered rice, the house-wife makes beautiful designs called *alpana* on the floor.

## Orissa

June/July—*Car Festival at Puri* : Jagannath, the deity in whose honour the festival is held, is believed to be an incarnation of Vishnu. King Indradyumna, the legend goes, found a relic of Krishna, and wished to house it in a temple of Vishnu. So he engaged the services of Visvakarma, architect of the gods, to build him a magnificent temple and an image which would be worthy of it. The architect agreed on the condition that he would be left entirely unobserved until the completion of his assignment. The work began, and in one day a beautiful temple was built. The King, however, was unable to restrain his curiosity, and went to see the architect at work. In a rage, Visvakarma abandoned his work, leaving the image without hands or feet. King's plea for forgiveness was answered, and Brahma breathed the power of deity into the half-completed image, which has since then become one of the most famous of the deities.

The deity Jagannath, his brother Balabhadra and their sister Subhadra, are placed on colossal chariots, each 13.7 m (45 ft) high with huge wheels measuring 2.1 m (7 ft) in diameter. These are pulled by hundreds of devotees from all parts of India. The spectacular procession goes from the temple in Puri to Gundicha Bari, a small distance away. After a stay of seven days at Gundicha Bari, the deities are carried back to their temple.





Cracker-packed effigies of Ravana, Kumbhakarna and Meghnad are all set to meet doom in North India at the end of *Dussehra*.



Caparisoned elephants take part in a spectacular procession during *Onam*, a harvest festival, at Trichur, Kerala.





During *Diwali* every home is decorated with twinkling clay lamps to welcome Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity.



*Puja* is performed during *Diwali* celebration.



## Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh

March/April—*Gangaur* : The spring festival of Gangaur is held in honour of Gauri, the goddess of abundance. Girls worship the goddess throughout the preceding fortnight. Although celebrated throughout Rajasthan with great enthusiasm, the celebrations in Jaipur and Udaipur have their own charm and attraction. In the former, a procession of the goddess is taken out from the city palace and thousands of people from the country-side through the city to take part in it, while in the latter, a boat procession in Pichola Lake adds to the gaiety of the festival.

June/July—*The Teej Festival* : The Teej is mainly a women's festival held in honour of Devi (Parvati). She is worshipped in the home for two days, and is then sent out of the house with all the love and affection due to a daughter of the house when she leaves for her husband's home. This festival also celebrates the beginning of the monsoon rains, and the peasants bring their families to the cities for the occasion. Their bright, colourful costumes add colour to the festival. In big towns, impressive processions, headed by richly caparisoned elephants, camels and horses, are taken out.

October/November—*Pushkar Ka Mela* : A fair is held by the sacred tank at Pushkar, about 11 km (7 miles) from Ajmer. The tank is believed to have been created by Brahma himself. Camel and horse shows are also held.

October/November—*Urs at Ajmer Sharif* : One of the most important places of pilgrimage for Indian Muslims is the annual *urs* festival at the shrine of Khwaja Moin-ud-Din Chishti in Ajmer, for he is regarded as the prince among the Muslim saints of India.

Pious and saintly from his early life, the Khwaja pursued religious knowledge at Samarkand and Bukhara, at Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, and finally in India. About 1190 A.D., the Khwaja reached Ajmer, where he settled down for the rest of his life. Devoted admirers, seekers of blessings as well as sceptic visitors poured into Ajmer during the 44 years of the Khwaja's life in Ajmer. It is said that even the bitterest agnostic returned from there a convert.

One of the most interesting features of the annual pilgrimage to Ajmer is that not only Muslims but even Hindus in their thousands attend the *urs*.

## Maharashtra and Gujarat

January—*Sankranti* : In Maharashtra, when two persons greet each other on this festive day, they exchange a few grains of multi-coloured sugar and fried *til* mixed with molasses and say "*til gud dya, god god bola*" (henceforth, let there be only friendship and good thoughts between us).

In Gujarat, the pandits consider *Sankranti* as an auspicious day to grant scholarships and certificates of merit to students who have successfully completed their studies in philosophy. In a Hindu household, new utensils are purchased and used for the first time. On this day, young boys and girls and even the old people, are on their house-tops flying kites.



March/April—*Gudi Padva* : This is the New Years' Day for the people of Maharashtra, a day of great festivity and rejoicing.

October/November—*Dev Diwali* : The hills of Mount Girnar at Junagadh in Gujarat are the scenes of great festivity on the 10th day after Diwali. Thousands of Jain pilgrims gather on this day at the foot of the sacred hills for circumambulation.

October/November—*Navaratri* : Though the festival is observed throughout India, it has special appeal in Gujarat. Every evening during the nine nights, womenfolk perform a *garba* dance. They go round and round an earthen lamp placed on a stand, singing and clapping their hands in a rhythmic movement.

## Goa

January 6—*Zatra at Cansaulim* : A remarkable Zatra is held at Cansaulim near Margao to celebrate the arrival of the three Kings at Bethlehem. Three young men from different villages wear wigs and gaudy garments and look like puppets. Then they climb to a church located on a hillock near the village. Inside the church is a carved infant Christ. Their entering the church is a signal for the villagers to start merriment, dance and music. There are fire-eating, fire-walking feats. This festival is observed with gay abandon.

December 3—*The Feast of St. Francis Xavier* : The Feast of Saint Francis Xavier is held at Velha Goa or Old Goa, about 10 kms east of Panaji, capital of Goa. The mummified body of St. Francis Xavier is enshrined in a silver casket in one of the chappels of Basilica of Bom Jesus built in 1605 by the Jesuits.

The body of the Saint is exposed to public once every ten years and pilgrims from all over the world come to pay homage.

March/April—*The Carnival* : The most colourful and unforgettable festival is the Carnival, celebrated by the Catholics with gay abandon once a year for three days preceding Lent—from Sunday to Tuesday. During these three days Goa is gripped by the pulsating rhythm of guitars and the lilt of folk songs. The revellers in their colourful improvised fancy dresses dance and sing in the streets, with King Momus, Lord of the Carnival, presiding over the scene.

## Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu

January—*Pongal* : This three-day festival is the biggest event of the year for the Tamils as well as for the people of Andhra Pradesh.

Bhogi-Pongal is the first of the three days, and is celebrated as a family festival.

Surya-Pongal, the second day, is dedicated to the Sun (*Surya*). On this day, *pongal* (rice cooked in milk and jaggery) is boiled by women who offer it to the Sun. Friends greet one another by asking "Is it boiled?" and the answer is "It is." Great rejoicing follows.

Mattu-Pongal, the third day, is the day dedicated to the worship and veneration of cattle (*mattu*). The *pongal* that has been offered to the local deities is given to the cattle to eat. Their horns are polished and flowers are hung around their necks.



Coloured balls of the *pongal* are also made and left in the open for birds. In Madurai, Tiruchirapalli and Tanjore in Tamil Nadu and several places in Andhra Pradesh, a kind of bull-fight, called the “Jallikattu” is held. Bundles containing money are tied to the horns of ferocious bulls, and unarmed villagers try to wrest the bundles from them. Bullock Cart race and cock-fight are also held. In Andhra Pradesh, every household displays its collection of dolls for three days.

With ingredients provided by the freshly gathered harvest, community meals are held at night. Everyone, however humble, is invited to sit at dinner with the richest number of the community. Even passers-by are invited to the feast.

January—*Tyagaraja Festival* : Tyagaraja was a South Indian composer and saint born in 1767, and is celebrated for the many Telugu songs he composed in praise of Rama. His life and works are a source of great inspiration to young poets and musicians. At Tiruvaiyaru, about 13 km (8 miles) from Tanjore, South Indian musicians gather at the composer’s memorial to sing his memory. Young artistes believe that they will be blessed with a melodious voice if they anoint the shrine with honey and sing Tyagaraja’s songs at his memorial.

March/April and December/January—*The Brahmotsavam* : This ten-day festival is celebrated with great eclat in the famous temples at Madurai, Kanchipuram and Tirupati. Intricately carved figurines of the temple deities are decked in splendid apparel, seated in magnificent carriages symbolic in character and taken out in a procession. Beautifully decorated elephants lead the procession and fireworks and crackers are let off along the route. Devotees follow the procession chanting verses from the scriptures and singing hymns, while householders along the route offer gifts to the deities.

February/March—*The Teppam* : At Mylapur Kapaleeswarar Temple and in the Parthasarthy Swamy Temple at Triplicane in Madras, this festival is seen at its best. Seated in a beautifully decorated *teppam* (float), the temple deity is floated in the tank. To the accompaniment of chanting by the priests, the *teppam* is taken round the tank three, five or seven times. The illuminated *teppam* is a pretty sight.

March/April—*The Tamil and the Telugu New Year’s Days* : They are generally celebrated in March/April.

On the Tamil New Year’s Day, a big Car Festival is held at Tiruvadamardur near Kumbakonam. Festivals are also held at Tiruchirapalli, Kanchipuram and many other places.

April/May—*Madurai River Festival* : The banks of the river Vaigai present a glittering spectacle. The two deities the god Sundaresa (incarnation of Shiva) and the goddess Meenakshi (incarnation of Parvati), with pearl crowns on their heads and riding on a golden bull, are taken out in a splendid procession from the Meenakshi temple. The god Alagar (incarnation of Vishnu) gives his sister, Meenakshi, in marriage to Sundaresa amid great rejoicing. Devotees clothed in yellow and red dance among the processionists and spray coloured water on them.



August—*River Festival on the banks of the Kaveri* : The village deities are taken out to the river in procession, preceded by ancient manuscripts and records possessed by the villages. Milk, rice, beads, red bangles and other articles symbolising fertility and prosperity are also carried in the procession and immersed in the river. The river goddess is invoked and the deities are bathed.

September/October—*Festival at Velanganni* : Roman Catholics believe that a miracle took place at Velanganni, about seven miles from Nagapatnam. An image of the Virgin Mary was miraculously brought up in a fisherman's net. It has since been housed in the local Church. Thousands of pilgrims flock to this 'Lourdes of the East' to be cured of their infirmities.

October/November—*Navaratri* : The first three days of this nine-day festival are dedicated to the goddess Lakshmi, the next three days to Shakti or Parvati, and the last three days to Sarasvati.

Every home has a *kolu*, a decorated stepped platform covered with toys and clay figurines, representing gods and goddesses and animals. Gifts are exchanged. In the main room a *kalasam* (a silver, copper or clay vessel) with a coconut in it, representing the goddess Durga) is placed, and girls dance and sing.

November/December—*Karthika Festival* : This is the South Indian festival of lights, and is celebrated on the night of the full moon.

The hill of Arunachala at Tiruvannamalai is the venue of the main celebrations. A huge beacon is lit before the Shiva temple there and remains ablaze for several days.

Devotees of Shiva believe that he embodies the universe. So in the five great South Indian Shiva temples, he is worshipped in the form of the five elements which make up the universe—air, water, earth, ether and fire.

November/December—*Vaikunth Ekadashi* : Legend has it that Mohini, the divine temptress, tried to persuade the pious King Rukmangada to partake of food on a day the scriptures ordained that a fast should be kept. In sore distress, he prayed to Vishnu, who saved him from the temptation and took him to his celestial abode (Vaikunth).

An interesting feature of this festival is a gateway that is thrown open to the thousands of pilgrims who come to the temples on this day. This gateway is called the "Vaikunth Vasal" or "Vaikunth Dwara" and to pass through it is to earn admittance to paradise. At Srirangam, a river-island town near Tiruchirapalli, this festival is observed for twenty days.

December—*St. Thomas's Day* : St. Thomas Didymus, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ, is believed to have been the founder of the Christian Church in South India. Impressive processions are taken out, and services are held in churches.

*The Fire-Walking Festival* : Fire-walking festivals are held in the villages in honour of the local deities and to ensure good harvest. They are held once a year, and the time is fixed by the local soothsayer.



The chief priest of the temple and the twelve “hero-youths”, who are to perform this feat, go out in a procession from the temple to bathe. An elaborately decorated image of the temple deity is held above the chief priest’s head. The ‘hero-youths’ carry colourful *chhatris* (fringed umbrellas) over their heads. Returning to the temple, the procession presents a weird sight. Smeared with turmeric powder, they begin the dance that culminates in fire-walking. They walk over a long pit covered with live coals and come out unscathed. After this, singing and feasting continues late into the night.

## Karnataka

January—*Makar Sankranti* : Sankranti as a harvest festival is celebrated joyously. Men, women and children attired in colourful tunics visit friends and relatives and exchange pieces of sugar cane, a mixture of fried *til*, molasses, pieces of dry coconut, peanuts and fried gram. The significance of this exchange is that sweetness should prevail in all our dealings. As a part of the festival, cows and bulls are given a wash and the horns are painted with bright colours and decorated with garlands, and are taken in a procession in the village to the accompaniment of pipes and drums. In the night a bonfire is lit and the animals are made to jump over the fire.

March/April—*Ugadi* : This is the New Year’s Day and is celebrated with gay abandon.

April—*Karaga* : This spectacular festival, associated with Draupadi, consort of Pandavas, is held in Bangalore. There is a moon-light procession of the incarnation of primordial power, with sword-brandishing devotees known as *Veer Kumars*.

August 11—*The Feast of St. Philomena* : A tastefully decorated image of St. Philomena is taken out in a procession through the city of Mysore. After the procession, a service is held in the beautiful Gothic Cathedral of St. Philomena. The Roman Catholic population of Mysore celebrates this day with great fervour.

September/October—*Dussehra* : It is celebrated as a *Nada Hobba* (national festival). In Mysore city, Dussehra is the most important festival of the year, and it includes numerous cultural programmes, i.e., sports meet, film festival, dance, drama and music festival, etc.

October/November—*Hazrat Khwaja Bande Nawaz Chisti Urs* : This is an important religious-cum-cultural celebration of Muslims in the State. Urs is held at Gulbarga in the month of *Zicad*, according to lunar calendar, and attracts not only devotees belonging to different communities within the State but also from the entire South. Hazrat Khwaja Bande Nawaz Chisti (1321-1422), a great *Sufi* saint and scholar was a disciple of Khwaja Nasir-ud-din of Delhi.

*The Great Head Anointing Ceremony at Sravanbelagola* : Once every 12 years, the colossal 17-metre (57 ft.) high granite statue of Gomateswara (a Jain saint), carved a thousand years ago, is anointed by several thousand Jain monks standing on a scaffolding. Gold and silver ornaments and precious stones are among the costly items poured on the statue.



According to legend, prince Gomateswara, who had redeemed his kingdom from his brother in a bitter way, realised the futility of earthly power. He, therefore, presented his kingdom to his brother and became an ascetic.

In admiration, the grateful brother erected a towering golden statue of Gomateswara. Gold became granite for mortal eyes.

## Kerala

March-April—*Vishu* : This is the Malayali New Year's Day. Everything wears a bright aspect. Gifts are exchanged. The custom is that elders give cash presents to dependents and relatives younger to them. This is called "Kyeneettam" (extending the hand).

April/May—*Poorum* : It is celebrated with great enthusiasm in the Vadakunathan Temple at Trichur, where thousands of people assemble on the day. An elephant procession and a beautiful display of pyro-technics are the important features of the festival.

August/September—*Onam* : This major festival of Kerala is celebrated against a setting of lush green vegetation. This picturesque harvest festival gives the people of Kerala four days of colour feasting, boat races, song and dance.

According to a legend Onam is celebrated to welcome from eternal exile the spirit of the pious king Mahabali and to assure him that his people are happy and wish him well.

At Trichur, caparisoned elephants take part in a spectacular procession. A magnificent display of fireworks marks the end of the festivities here. At Shoranur, appreciative crowds gather on the green where colourfully dressed *Kathakali* dancers re-enact the well-loved stories of the epic heroes and virtuous women.

On the eve of *Thiruonam*, the second and most important day of the festival, King Mahabali is supposed to visit his kingdom. Every home is bright and shining in preparation for the royal visit. No work is done after midnight. Visits are exchanged and lengths of auspicious saffron cloth are presented by friends to one another.

The *Vallumkali* (boat race) is one of the main attractions of Onam, and is best seen at Aranmula and Kottayam. About a hundred oarsmen row huge and graceful *odee* (boats). Oars dip and flash to the rhythm of drums and cymbals in each boat. The songs are generally typical in character and concern people well known in Malabar. Above each boat gleam scarlet silk umbrellas: their number denotes the affluence of the family owning the boat. Gold coins and tassels hang from the umbrellas.

In the evening pretty girls perform the *Kyekottikali* (the clapping dance) in the open, dancing around the traditional brass lamp. Intricate pattern of flower petals are made on the grass forming a flower carpet for the dance.



# Appendix

## Festivals at a glance

Month/Date	Festival	Place of Celebration
January 1	<i>New Year's Day</i>	Mainly in cities throughout India
January 26	<i>Republic Day</i>	Throughout the country, especially in New Delhi and State capitals
January	<i>Thyagaraja Festival</i>	In Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh
January	<i>Pongal</i>	In Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh
January	<i>Sankranti</i>	In Maharashtra, Karnataka and Gujarat
January	<i>Lohri</i>	In Punjab and Haryana
January	<i>Bhogali Bihu</i>	In Assam
January	<i>Gangasagar Mela</i>	In Bengal
February/March	<i>Vasanta Panchami</i>	Throughout India, especially in northern and western India
February/March	<i>Shivaratri</i>	Throughout India
February/March	<i>Holi</i>	Throughout India, especially in northern India
February/March	<i>Teppam</i>	In Tamil Nadu
February/March	<i>Ramakrishna Utsav</i>	Mainly in Bengal
March 21	<i>Jamshed Navroz</i>	Throughout in India, especially in Maharashtra
March/April	<i>Mahavira Jayanti</i>	Througout in India, especially in Gujarat
March/April	<i>New Year's Day</i>	In Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kashmir and Maharashtra
March/April	<i>Good Friday</i>	Throughout India
March/April	<i>Easter</i>	Throughout India
March/April	<i>Nau Roz</i>	In Kashmir
March/April	<i>Rama Navami</i>	Mainly in Uttar Pradesh
March/April	<i>Dol Purnima</i>	In Bengal
March/April	<i>Gangaur</i>	Mainly in Rajasthan
March/April	<i>Brahmotsavam</i>	In Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh
March/April	<i>Vishu</i>	In Kerala
March/April	<i>Christian Mela</i>	In Mehrauli near Delhi
March/April	<i>Car Festival</i>	At Mathura in Uttar Pradesh
April	<i>Jwalamukhi Fair</i>	In Himachal Pradesh
April	<i>Tamil New Year's Day</i>	In Tamil Nadu
April	<i>Car Festival</i>	In Tamil Nadu
April	<i>Karaga</i>	In Bangalore
April 14	<i>Naba Barsha</i>	In Bengal
April/May	<i>Vaisakhi</i>	Mainly in Haryana and Punjab
April/May	<i>Buddha Jayanti</i>	Throughout India
April/May	<i>Goru and Rongali Bihu</i>	In Assam
April/May	<i>Madurai River Festival</i>	In Tamil Nadu
April/May	<i>Pooram</i>	In Kerala
	<i>Shab-e-Barat*</i>	Throughout India
	<i>Id-ul-Fitr*</i>	Throughout India
	<i>Id-ul-Azha*</i>	Throughout India

\* This can occur in any month of the solar calendar.



Month/Date	Festival	Place of Celebration
May	<i>Jaitha Ashtami</i>	In Kashmir
June	<i>Mela Hemis Gompa</i>	In Kashmir
June/July	<i>Car Festival</i>	At Puri in Orissa
June/July	<i>Teej</i>	Mainly in Rajasthan
July/August	<i>Naga Panchami</i>	Throughout India
July/August	<i>Raksha Bandhan</i>	Mainly in northern and western India
July/August	<i>Sravana Festival</i>	At Brindavan in Uttar Pradesh
August 11	<i>The Feast of St. Philomena</i>	At Mysore in Karnataka
August 15	<i>Independence Day</i>	Throughout India
August	<i>Kaveri River Festival</i>	In Tamil Nadu
August/September	<i>Ganesha Chaturthi</i>	Mainly in western and southern India
August/September	<i>Onam</i>	In Kerala
August/September	<i>Janmaashtami</i>	Throughout India
August/September	<i>Khordad Sal</i>	Mainly in Maharashtra
August/September	<i>Urs Shah Hamadan</i>	In Kashmir
August/September	<i>Sair-e-Gulfaroshan</i>	At Mehrauli near Delhi
August/September	<i>Ban Yatra</i>	In Uttar Pradesh
	<i>Muharram*</i>	Throughout India
October 2	<i>Gandhi Jayanti</i>	Throughout India
September/October	<i>Dussehra</i>	Throughout India
September/October	<i>Velanganni Festival</i>	In Tamil Nadu
	<i>Id-i-Milad*</i>	Throughout India
October/November	<i>Diwali</i>	Throughout India
October/November	<i>Gurpurab</i>	Throughout India
October/November	<i>Tikka</i>	In Punjab and Haryana
October/November	<i>Kansa ka Mela</i>	In Uttar Pradesh
October/November	<i>Ras Lila</i>	In Assam and Manipur
October/November	<i>Pushkar ka Mela</i>	Near Ajmer in Rajasthan
	<i>Urs Moin-un-Din Chishti*</i>	At Ajmer in Rajasthan
October/November	<i>Khwaja Bande Nawaz Chishti Urs*</i>	At Gulbarga in Karnataka
October/November	<i>Dev-Diwali</i>	At Girnar in Gujarat
October/November	<i>Navaratri</i>	Throughout India
November 14	<i>Children's Day</i>	Throughout India
November/December	<i>Karthika Festival</i>	In Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh
November/December	<i>Vaikunth Ekadashi</i>	In Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh
December 25	<i>Christmas</i>	Throughout India
December	<i>Urs Hazrat Nizammud-Din*</i>	In Delhi
December 3	<i>Saint Francis Xavier's Feast</i>	In Goa
December	<i>St. Thomas' Day</i>	In Tamil Nadu
	<i>Fire-Walking Festival*</i>	In Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh

\* This can occur in any month of the solar calendar.







The Indian calendar is one long procession of festivals. These are varied in origin as they are large in number. Some of them celebrate the birthdays of national heroes, some the eternal cycle of the seasons. Others have origin in religion, and in the myths and legends of popular faith. They enliven social life and unite the people by bringing them together in joyful celebration in shared remembrance of a common past.



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